

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS SCOTTISH MASK & PUPPET CENTRE

A former cleansing department depot in Glasgow is home to a unique organisation that aims to celebrate the art of puppetry and take it forward into the future

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I remember as a child settling down each day to watch *Button Moon*. The kids' TV programme was a puppet show where all the characters, based on kitchen utensils, set off for adventures in space. Mr Spoon was (you've guessed it) fashioned with wooden spoon arms and a margarine tub for a head. His daughter Tina was mostly teaspoon, and an egg cup portrayed her friend Eggbert. Looking back, it was a primitive production, nothing like the kind of thing that children enjoy today. But the underlying appeal of *Button Moon* was timeless: it told a good story.

More than three decades on, in a small room in north-west Glasgow whose walls are lined with books dedicated to the art of puppetry, I'm sitting across the table from one of the show's creators. Dr Malcolm Knight, founder of the Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre, is an actor, teacher, archivist and maker of puppets and masks. *Button Moon*, he tells me, was his first gig, and the start of a long and eventful career.

It almost didn't happen. Malcolm had found himself in London desperate for a job and was about to inquire about work in a nearby factory. Despairingly, he looked again at the wanted ads. "Above the factory job was an advert that said, 'Actor/musician wanted. Must be 5ft 8in and hold a driving licence.' I had none of those things but I called the number anyway," he laughs.

The voice on the other end of the phone, he recalls, sounded just like a puppet, but it gave him directions and said they'd be waiting for him to arrive. The outfit was Playboard Puppet Theatre, the brainchild of Ian Allen and John Thirtle, who took Malcolm on, putting him in the workshop where he learned how to make puppets. He would travel with the company, watching their touring productions and, one day, when one of the actors fell ill, he was asked to step in. It was this experience, operating rod and glove puppets, in a show that was being seen by children all across the UK, that led to his work on *Button Moon*. ▶



[Above and left] SMPC has offices, workshops, an 80-seat studio theatre, a box office and a café. Above the doors are two ceramic lion plant holders from the Gladstone Pottery in Stoke-on-Trent, while the façade has a border of Greek and Roman masks



[Clockwise from top left] The mask and marionette repair workshop, with three wooden clown puppets from the Ken Barnard Collection, a juggler and an opera singer from the Miles Lee International Collection, and a white shaman by the famous Norwegian sculptor Boge Berg; a life cast by Grant Mason; the library has around 7,000 volumes on every aspect of puppet theatre; Malcolm Knight framing prints and lithographs from the Centre's extensive collection; a woodworking machine that can be used as a drill press, saw or lathe. Above is a painting of Mr Punch by the late Iain Smith

“WE HAD TO DECIDE WHETHER TO CUT AND RUN OR TO PUT DOWN ROOTS HERE”



Malcolm had always wanted to be a professional artist. He'd grown up in Stoke-on-Trent (also home to Robbie Williams and Motorhead's Lemmy) in a landscape punctuated by coal mines and potteries. Malcolm would spend much of his time in the back garden, digging the clay from the ground to fashion his own little figurines. The family home was full of Toby jugs, and Doulton and Wedgwood pottery; one of his uncles worked at the Doulton factory, and a constant supply of seconds made their way into his house.

Hull University's theatre department beckoned. "I needed to learn more about mask-making," he explains. "I knew I wanted to work with my hands, and I admired the straightforward work ethic that I'd witnessed."

Through friends and contacts, Malcolm made his way to Glasgow, where he worked with the groundbreaking 7:84 theatre company, creating masks for their productions as well as writing pieces for his own theatre company, The Fellow Travellers. By the late 1970s, he was working in community education, combining his theatre background with his love of writing, making and performing.

A 'garret', as he calls it, in Otago Street in Glasgow's west end was Malcolm's first centre for puppet-and mask-making. He created a small 35-seat theatre, a carving room and an office, building it up over the course of eight years from a one-man show to an ▶





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[Left] A small Chinese face mask of a bearded demon. [Below] A 1979 photo of Malcolm making Roman masks for an exhibition at Paisley Museum. [Opposite, top] Four giant Indian head masks commissioned by the Glasgow MELA made by Malcolm, Grant, Jacqui McColl and Dima Novara. [Opposite, below left] Pigment pots in the workshop of Grant Mason FX. [Below right] Many of Grant's creatures have hairstyles made using a punching technique derived from wig-making



outfit with 11 members of staff and a programme of events and commissions.

By the late 1980s, Malcolm's endeavour had grown so much that he needed to find a bigger space. The chance to set up in Kelvindale, in a former Glasgow City Council cleansing department building, came up. The place was derelict and had been badly vandalised. "More than £100,000 worth of damage had been done," he laments. "We had to decide whether to cut and run, or put down roots here."

He spent 18 months pursuing the lease; he raised his own funds, received funding through the Office of Arts and Libraries in London, and secured business sponsorship money from Tay Homes Ltd. The housebuilder had bought a land-locked site behind the derelict building and a deal was struck to allow access. A 99-year lease was arranged with Glasgow City Council, with a peppercorn rent, and Malcolm and a

team of devoted friends, theatre students and former colleagues began the clean-up operation. The premises offered a home for lots of resources, including a theatre, workshops, a café, a reading room and admin spaces. The volunteers worked their way through the building, relying on donations and recycled furnishings to kit it out. Café chairs came, second-hand, from the Third Eye Centre (as the CCA was then known), workbenches in the carving room were rescued from Bellahouston Academy, and the glass in the cabinets that display the various puppets, masks and marionettes was donated when the Museum of Transport closed down.

The Centre officially opened with a special showing of *New Beginnings*, a production by a Russian theatre company, running concurrently with a Soviet-British UNIMA (Union of International Marionettes Associations) conference. Malcolm had travelled extensively, attending exhibitions and conferences, ►





[Opposite page] The Creature Shop of Grant Mason specialises in bespoke creations for film, television and theatre. Grant is a master mould-maker who trained with Image Animation at Pinewood Studios. He has been a resident artist at SMPC for the last 25 years. [Left] Grant working on a silicon mould in his wet shop. Above his head are a set of six life casts taken from various actors who have required prosthetic makeovers



seeking out master puppeteers from whom he could learn and refine his craft. In doing so, he built up an impressive network of global contacts, and continues to this day to bring companies, specialists and productions to Glasgow, linking up with and supporting similar organisations from all over the world.

The idea was never to exist in isolation; on the contrary, Malcolm has always worked to collaborate, develop and preserve the art form. While he was busy establishing the Centre (with his wife Sarah, a textile and design artist, taking charge of the running of the place), Malcolm was also immersed in putting together a new course in Puppet Theatre Arts for Anniesland College, which, at the time, was the only one of its kind in Scotland.

One student caught his eye immediately. Grant Mason now operates a special-effects workshop and business from the Centre. "Even as a student, his work was remarkable," recalls Malcolm. "He was making latex masks and you could see, even at that point, just how impressive his sculpture skills were." As Malcolm predicted, Grant went on to do big things. He has worked across TV, film and theatre, creating pieces like Baby Dawn from Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting*, and props for films and TV shows including *Shallow Grave* and *Taggart*. A constant stream of actors visit this unassuming Kelvindale locale for life casts to be taken.

As president of the International Federation of Centres for Puppetry Arts, Malcolm's reach is wide. Russian, Indian, Japanese, Italian and Spanish companies have presented shows, workshops and master classes at the Centre. It is, as Malcolm stresses, a necessary infrastructure to keep the tradition and skills alive.

In addition to the performances and conferences, the Centre offers classes for children to learn how to make their own puppets, or host a birthday party in the workshops. ▶



The Centre is also home to several permanent exhibitions – treasured collections that have both professional and personal significance for Malcolm. Ken Barnard’s marionettes are on show here (Barnard was a puppeteer and maker from a family troupe whose legacy is an important element of the UK tradition). There are also puppets by John Blundall, creator of *Thunderbirds’* Parker; the Pak Asep Sunander Sunarya Collection (Java) of Wayang Golek; and Japanese Noh masks from the Nohzin-kai school in Kobe, among many others.

“I’m 64 now and should be thinking about retiring,” laughs Malcolm, “but instead, I’m raising funds to build an extension on to this place.” His aim is to create an additional 108-seat theatre. He has been inspired by John Parkinson from the Up-Front Gallery in Penrith, who has fulfilled a lifelong ambition to build his own puppet theatre on his family farm and who is now sharing plans to see if it can be recreated in Glasgow.

Retirement, it seems, is not a concept that Malcolm is familiar with. “When Nohzin Suzuki came here in 1994 to talk about the Japanese Noh theatre tradition, he said to me that if you sow the seeds correctly and serve the apprenticeship well, the spirit of what you do opens out like a flower. You do your best work in old age.”

If that’s the case, it seems we’ve not yet seen the best of what this ingenious man has to offer. ■



[Top] Centre manager Sarah Lee and her mother Olive Lee fold a quilt in the training workshop. The Centre has a store of many different kinds of fabrics and materials, and this workshop is also used for training sessions. [Left] Scrap material for puppet-making. [Below] Chalk drawings of facial muscles and profiles by Grant Mason, used in the teaching of facial anatomy

